

Funding Minnesota Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Key Findings and Recommendations

Minnesota MTSS

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is an integrated system of high quality, standards-based instruction and interventions that are matched to students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. The framework relies on strong core instruction and layered tiers of supports for all needs of the whole child, with a focus on equity and cultural responsiveness as a means of ensuring student success.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) advocates for the use of MTSS in Minnesota's public schools to increase the number of students meeting grade-level standards and graduating with skills for further education and careers. MDE's work with MTSS is connected to implementing practices that embed the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards with fidelity and building supports to increase academic achievement for all students (<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/mtss/>).

Research studies

Working with MDE, Wilder Research has been conducting annual voluntary surveys of Minnesota K-12 schools about their implementation of MTSS since the 2012-13 school year. Schools that participate in the surveys receive their results along with the aggregated results of the same type of schools (elementary, middle, high school, and K-12) in Minnesota.

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed life across the globe, especially for educational systems. MDE decided to pause on the statewide survey. In its place, MDE decided to invite some schools to participate in voluntary key informant interviews to ask specifically about their successes and challenges related to allocating their school's funds. Having enough funding was mentioned by schools in previous surveys as one of the challenges in implementing and sustaining MTSS. Key informant interviews included schools that have been implementing MTSS over multiple years, are at full implementation stage, are located in the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota, and have made improvement in their student academic performance. Altogether, 13 school teams participated in the interviews that were conducted in mid-March through early May 2021.

In addition, MDE and Wilder had conversations with MTSS field experts, state coordinators, and researchers from Michigan, Florida, and Wisconsin. These states are known by MDE to have been implementing MTSS for many years and are further along in their work than Minnesota.

MDE aims to use the information and interview findings to give insight to other schools and districts about how schools are working and making adjustments to sustain and fund MTSS given their existing resources. Additionally, MDE aims to use the findings to inform policymakers about potential technical supports the state can offer to schools to further support their efforts in implementing and funding the MTSS framework.

Key findings

There is not one single way to fund MTSS. Many factors, including unique school and district contexts, influence the decisions that schools make in funding MTSS.

In addition, all school teams in the interviews indicated that funding is not the driver of their MTSS. Instead, their primary motivation to meet all their students' academic and social and emotional learning needs influences the way they implement the MTSS framework and allocate school funds, staffing, and other resources to support it.

MTSS is my number one [priority] that has to be in place because every child deserves what they need. Figuring out where your students are, what they need, and giving them targeted instruction. That is the key. All the other stuff can fall away but this and core instruction need to be done. You do these two pieces and your students are going to achieve.

Having said that, schools shared the following characteristics:

- Typically, schools use general funds to implement their MTSS.
- Schools have dedicated individuals and teams that regularly meet to lead, coordinate, and implement critical MTSS components. Implementation of MTSS is embedded into regular duties of leaders and all educators and, thus, is paid by their contracts.
- Schools get resources and supports from their districts. These can include getting assessment systems and tools, curriculum and instruction materials, coaching supports, or trainings. The districts are flexible and responsive, as some schools mentioned they could supplement or replace some of the district's assessments with other assessments that worked better for their school or help fund all or part of the curriculum and instruction materials, as needed.
- School districts provide guidance to schools to navigate funding options. Relatedly, when schools face budget cuts or need funding for additional interventions, they rely on the school district's support as well as their own experience in adjusting staffing and resources and getting additional funding.
- During their working time and as part of their responsibilities, teachers, interventionists, and other specialists routinely meet to collaborate, participate in Professional Learning Communities (PLC), and receive training. Q Comp and school's professional development funds are often used, in addition to general funds.
- They use continuous data-based decision-making.

Recommendations

Following are some considerations about navigating funding and strengthening implementation based on the interviews and conversations with and resources provided by the state experts. Considerations are organized by whether they are relevant to schools and districts or MDE.

For schools and school districts

- **Promote shared language of MTSS for school and district leaders and staff.** MTSS is often mistaken as one intervention or a practice, or used only to focus on addressing students needing supplemental or intensive supports. Rather, MTSS is a structure that is designed to organize the school- and district-wide infrastructure, resulting in effective and efficient use of practices and initiatives matched to learner need. It denotes one comprehensive system with many supports that are connected and aligned to create conditions where all learners can thrive. Continuing to increase educators' knowledge and shared language about MTSS will be important. Also, by having a mindset that MTSS is intended for meeting the needs of all learners, schools and districts promote a strength-based rather than deficit-based perspective.
- **Focus on continuous improvement.** Continuous improvement is based on the principles that making sustainable change takes time; involves collective effort; and requires constant adaptation, data collection, and learning. Therefore, we recommend that schools and districts use the MTSS framework to collectively identify student needs and outcome goals; implement and fund instruction, interventions, and supports in a sustainable manner; collect and review data; and make ongoing adjustments to ultimately achieve the outcomes.
- **Integrate assessment systems.** In order to provide instruction, interventions, and supports to match learner need, it is important that educators make informed instructional and programmatic decisions based on the needs and assets of each and every learner from a whole child perspective. It is useful to have a comprehensive assessment data system that coordinates data from multiple assessments and measures, including for academic, behavior, and social and emotional learning; that is accessible to all educators; and that is in an easy-to-understand format.
- **Intentionally engage families and communities.** Student outcomes improve considerably when schools and families collaborate to address student needs. Therefore, it is important that schools engage families as meaningful stakeholders through effective home-school collaboration that supports the continuity of learning and outcomes for students. Similarly, community partners provide funds, services, and supports to schools; help expand student learning opportunities; and facilitate student civic engagement. Both families and community partners should be invited to participate on leadership teams and committees that make system-wide decisions and influence the creation and selection of policies, practices, and programs in schools and districts.
- **Engage finance and implementation teams in MTSS.** To meet grant funding requirements and ensure sufficient allocation of funds to support and sustain implementation of MTSS, we recommend that individuals with knowledge of MTSS and individuals with knowledge of school budgeting and the use of state and federal funds engage in MTSS planning and decision-making.

For Minnesota Department of Education

- **Strengthen technical assistance and support schools and districts in implementing and funding their MTSS by:**
 - **Creating a Frequently Asked Questions page about MTSS** on MDE’s website to inform schools and districts about MTSS efforts in Minnesota and provide basic information about the MTSS purpose, benefits, and components.
 - **Creating general guidance for school districts in Minnesota on how to coordinate the use of state and federal funds to support the implementation of MTSS.**
 - **Implementing individualized partnerships with and coaching support to schools and school districts** to help address their unique needs, concerns, barriers, and challenges in implementing and allocating funding for their MTSS. Partnering with an outside organization with this expertise could be helpful.
 - **Increasing flexibility in grant requirements and revising timelines for grant applications to align with schools’ budgeting calendars.**
- **Enhance statewide evaluation.** We recommend that MDE continue to gather statewide surveys of MTSS implementation and enhance it with funding-related questions. MDE could also study cohorts of schools in the different stages of implementation over time to get a deeper understanding and insights about how to effectively support schools and districts as they navigate their funding and implementation challenges.
- **Continue to share information and learnings with educators, practitioners, and field experts locally and nationally.**

Resources

Gozali-Lee, E., Petersen, A., Lee, D., & Hall, T. (May 2021). *Funding for Multi-Tiered System of Supports implementation: Summary of interview findings with Minnesota schools*. Wilder Research.

Michigan Department of Education. (2021). *Michigan Department of Education fiscal guidance for implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) v. 1.0*. www.michigan.gov/MTSS

Shakman, K., Wogan, D., Rodriguez, S., Boyce, J., & Shaver, D. (2020). *Continuous improvement in education: A toolkit for schools and districts* (REL 2021–014). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2021014.pdf

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Funding for Multi-Tiered System of Supports implementation: Summary of interview findings with Minnesota schools* and the conversations with representatives from Michigan, Wisconsin, and Florida.

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